

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Nobuyuki Tsujii: Beethoven, Chopin & Liszt

Sunday 13 April 2025, 7pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Beethoven Piano Sonata in C, Op.53 (Waldstein)	25'
Liszt En rêve – nocturne for piano, S.207	2'
Liszt Mephisto Waltz No.1	11'
<i>Interval</i>	
Chopin 2 Nocturnes, Op.27	11'
Chopin Piano Sonata No.3 in B minor, Op.58	27'

Performer

Nobuyuki Tsujii *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes including an interval.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Sonata in C, Op.53 (Waldstein)

1 *Allegro con brio*

2 *Introduzione: Adagio molto* –

3 *Rondo: Allegretto moderato*

Count Ferdinand Ernst Gabriel von Waldstein was a Vienna-born aristocrat from the Bohemian noble Waldstein (or, more correctly, Valdštejn) family, who had moved to live in Bonn in 1788. Early on, Waldstein recognised the prodigious talents of that city's most famous son, Ludwig van Beethoven. He even went as far as sponsoring the 21-year-old's move to the bright lights of Vienna – ostensibly to study with Joseph Haydn – in 1792, writing in the young man's friendship book: 'Dear Beethoven! You go to realise a long-desired wish: the genius of Mozart is still in mourning and weeps for the death of its disciple. By incessant application, receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands.'

By the time he came to write his Piano Sonata in C, Op.53, in 1804, Beethoven had not had contact with Waldstein for many

years. But he clearly remembered the elder man's support and encouragement with fondness, dedicating to Waldstein what would prove one of his most sublime keyboard creations, a Sonata that uncannily blends a sense of restraint, elegance and luminous lyricism with some of the most fearsome technical challenges Beethoven would ever set a pianist. The piece even caused a few raised eyebrows in Beethoven's time. The musical periodical *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* observed: 'The first and last movements belong among the most brilliant and original pieces for which we are grateful to this master, but they are also full of strange whims and very difficult to perform.' Those strange whims perhaps include one of the final movement's most challenging passages, demanding both a sparkling trill and singing melody from the right hand alongside fast running figures in the left, or the hushed, rippling cascades of notes across both hands that Beethoven requests near the Sonata's end. Despite such fiendish inventions, however, the composer wasn't out to dazzle listeners with fiery keyboard fireworks (in the manner, perhaps, of tonight's next composer). Instead, his intention was surely to invite them to revel in the sheer joy of the piano's sonic capabilities.

He establishes a sense of febrile propulsion and excitement right from the first movement's opening, with its driving rhythms and leaping melody, which he contrasts abruptly with the movement's hymn-like second theme. The Sonata originally had a different slow movement, which Beethoven later excised and published separately as his *Andante favori* in 1805. In its place he inserted what is effectively an elaborate introduction to the Sonata's magical finale, which begins quietly with a graceful theme against a rippling accompaniment before later erupting into urgent, vivid life.

Franz Liszt (1811–86)

En rêve – nocturne for piano, S.207

Franz Liszt was a 19th-century musical superstar and a towering figure in piano music, who set out to dazzle and overwhelm listeners with sounds and effects they could scarcely believe possible from a single person at a single keyboard, in the process pushing players (himself included) to the very limits

of their capabilities. In 1848, however, everything changed: he stepped back from performing, concentrated on composing, and developed ever more revolutionary musical ideas that would peer ahead in time to the radicalism of the 20th century. The miniature *En rêve* from 1885 – only a year before Liszt's death – is a radical creation when compared with the composer's exuberant earlier works (tonight's next piece, for example). It sounds like music that has been stripped back to its essentials: a wistful melody, a gently chiming accompaniment, and an ambiguous approach to harmony whose blurriness seems particularly fitting for a piece so immersed in the shadow world of dreams and the night.

Franz Liszt

Mephisto Waltz No.1

We jump back two decades in Liszt's career for tonight's next piece, understandably one of his most celebrated keyboard creations. For certain 19th-century composers, the legend of Faust selling his soul to the devil had it all: ambition, individualism, religion, sex and a good dash of the supernatural too. Liszt was so inspired by the tale that he wrote four *Mephisto* waltzes on the subject, naming them after the devilish Mephistopheles who arranges both Faust's worldly pleasures and his eternal damnation. Tonight's *Mephisto* Waltz No.1 exists in versions for orchestra and piano duet, though Liszt's solo-piano incarnation is very much an independent composition, describing an episode from Austrian poet (and violinist) Nikolaus Lenau's 1836 retelling of the legend. Mephistopheles has taken Faust to a dance at a village inn, where the demon whips up the villagers into a frenzy with his violin playing. Faust, meanwhile, finds alternative sources of entertainment, disappearing with one of the local beauties into a nearby forest to the plaintive song of a nightingale. Liszt maintains the piece's deranged, whirling rhythms almost throughout, only slowing for music that conveys the couple's romantic yearnings. The diabolical Mephistopheles, however, has the final word.

Frédéric Chopin (1810–49)

2 Nocturnes, Op.27

1 *Nocturne in C sharp minor: Larghetto*

2 *Nocturne in D flat major: Lento sostenuto*

Irish composer John Field first popularised the dreamy keyboard nocturne as a musical style, and Liszt developed it further in works such as *En rêve*, as we heard earlier. It's Frédéric Chopin, however, who's most closely identified with the form: he wrote no fewer than 21 of them, starting aged 17 and ending just three years before his death, and using them to convey a broad tapestry of moods, from the wistful to the joyful, the melancholy to the downright anguished. He clearly conceived the two Nocturnes, Op.27, of 1836 as a complementary pair, and dedicated them both to Countess Thérèse d'Appony, wife of the

Austrian ambassador to France, whose Sunday afternoon Paris salon he would regularly frequent. The first, in C sharp minor, is haunting and haunted, its elusive harmonies and rhythms clearly designed to unsettle, though it closes in the relative brightness of the major. That turn towards the light prepares us for the far airier second, in D flat major. One of Chopin's most voluptuous nocturnes, it presents its singing melody in three grand cycles: first quietly, then even more hushed, and finally bursting with joyful confidence.

Frédéric Chopin

Piano Sonata No.3 in B minor, Op.58

1 *Allegro maestoso*

2 *Scherzo: Molto vivace*

3 *Largo*

4 *Finale: Presto, non tanto*

Even in Chopin's own time, there were questions as to whether the composer was simply a purveyor of delicious keyboard morsels such as nocturnes, ballades and impromptus, or whether he was truly capable of full-scale musical meals – an entire keyboard sonata, for instance. He wrote three of those during his career: the first is essentially a student work, and the second contains the much-quoted 'funeral march'. Tonight's is Chopin's final piano sonata, and the one that approaches most closely the long-standing sonata traditions that had been established and developed in Germany and Austria. It nonetheless retains Chopin's distinctively lyrical, sometimes fragile musical language. Chopin himself gave the Sonata's premiere, in Paris on 26 February 1845, though it wasn't universally admired. Liszt, for one, didn't care for it – but then again, Chopin thought little of Liszt and his keyboard innovations either.

It is, however, one of Chopin's most technically challenging works, even amid an output that tests the power, insight and sensitivity of a pianist. The first movement contrasts a bold, propulsive procession of chords with a later melody that might seem closer to a nocturne. Chopin's quicksilver second movement dashes by in gossamer textures, giving way to the visionary lyricism of the slow third movement. His finale, however, surges with apparently unstoppable energy, its bounding theme returning again and again before a closing coda that pushes both pianist and listener into extremes of what can only be described as euphoria.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2025

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